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SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/BCLTV, DRL, DRL/PHD, and DRL/IRF

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [KIRF](#) [PGOV](#) [SOCI](#) [VM](#) [ETMIN](#) [HUMANR](#) [RELFREE](#)

SUBJECT: Khmer and Cham in Vietnam --  
- Minorities by Ethnicity and Faith

1. (U) Summary: The Mekong Delta province of An Giang on the Cambodian border is home to members of all of Vietnam's recognized religious faiths and two of its larger ethnic minorities, the Khmer and the Cham. The Khmer follow Theravada Buddhism, while most Vietnamese Buddhists belong to the Mahayana tradition common in Northeast Asia. An Giang's Cham Muslim community is one of several scattered around the Mekong Delta and south-central coastal Vietnam. Both groups seem able to maintain their languages, religions, and traditions, but also appear to avoid undertaking actions that might be seen as controversial. End Summary.

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Khmer Theravada Buddhists  
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2. (U) Tri Ton District in southwestern An Giang is home to about 51,700 ethnic Khmer people, 47 percent of the total district population. Many of them appear to speak the Khmer language at home and in town. The distinctive, colorful, Cambodian-style pagodas clearly mark Khmer communities. Despite the difference between the Mahayana and Theravada traditions, members of both belong to the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha, the GVN-recognized Buddhist organization. DCM and delegation, along with several provincial officials, visited a Khmer Buddhist temple in Tri Ton District, An Giang on May 20 and spoke with the head monk, Reverend Chau Ti. He spoke no Vietnamese, only Khmer, although he has lived in Vietnam his whole life, 57 years.

3. (U) Reverend Ti described the situation for Khmer in Tri Ton district. They have lived in the area for "several generations." A few people fled to Tri Ton from Cambodia during the Khmer Rouge period, but have long since returned, he claimed. The Khmer language is taught at an ethnic minority boarding school in the district center, and there are other Khmer programs in Soc Trang and Tra Vinh provinces. However, there is a shortage of Khmer-speaking teachers, especially in remote villages. Monks also teach the Khmer language at pagodas, as permitted by authorities. Reverend Ti also said that local authorities also support Khmer festivals and denied allegations that the GVN suppresses the Khmer language and culture. There is some radio programming in Khmer and some regulations are printed in Khmer. Khmer language textbooks are published in Soc Trang. Reverend Ti added that he uses Buddhist texts published in Cambodia brought to Vietnam by businessmen.

4. (U) Reverend Ti pointed out that Theravada Buddhism is practiced somewhat differently now than in the past. The tradition of mendicant monks is less common. Currently, those monks who wish to go from house to house to seek food do so from 10:00AM until noon. They eat after that and then fast until the following morning. Some men still become monks temporarily. Pagodas used to take in the community's orphans, who would then live in the temples. However, because "socio-economic conditions are better" and because the GVN takes care of orphans, he said, the pagodas no longer undertake this role. Nonetheless, some "homeless" children, apparently in their teens, do come to the pagoda and stay there, he claimed. Mission officers encountered several such teens helping out at the pagoda on the day of their visit.

5. (U) While Reverend Ti said he has no contact with monks in Cambodia, he regularly associates with other monks in Vietnam, both Khmer Theravada and Kinh Mahayana. Relations between the followers of the two branches are fine, he declared. He had attended the tenth anniversary celebration of the provincial Buddhist association at a Kinh temple in Chau Doc that morning. One difference between followers of the two traditions is that Mahayana initiates study in Buddhist academies, while Khmer initiates study under senior monks at local pagodas. The respective ranking systems of monks are similar, however, he said.

6. (U) The pagoda that DCM and delegation visited has four monks. The current structure dates from 1980. It replaced another pagoda of the same name that had been built in about 1910, but subsequently destroyed. About 7,000 Khmer live in the surrounding commune, according to Reverend Ti.

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Cham Muslims  
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17. (U) Almost 20 Muslim followers warmly received DCM, his delegation, and several provincial officials at the Phu Hiep village mosque on May 20. They introduced themselves by title, rather than name, and included the local community chief, the deputy chief, and the village's Imam. About 17,000 Chams live in An Giang, the chief said. Most of the people in the village are Cham Muslims whose ancestors had migrated there after "wars" with the Kinh. Non-Muslims who marry Muslims must convert to Islam to be accepted by the community. If they do not, the couple usually moves away. Young people who leave the area usually move to other places with Muslim communities, including Ho Chi Minh City, they said. The community also participates in cultural events and festivals with Cham Muslims elsewhere in Vietnam, especially in nearby Tay Ninh province, according to the chief. The Cham language is very similar to those of the Roglai and the Ede minorities in the Central Highlands and is also closely related to Malay, they added. Several of the Muslims told mission officers that they had more than one "wife," but only one official wife under Vietnamese law.

18. (U) The mosque in Phu Hiep was established in 1750 and has been renovated four times, most recently in 1967. The GVN declared the mosque a historic relic in 1989, according to the deputy chief. About 500 households with a total of 2129 people use the mosque. The Imam pointed out that the mosque is two kilometers from the Cambodian border and recalled that Pol Pot's forces had destroyed five mosques in An Giang and damaged several others.

19. (U) The Muslim leaders credited the GVN, and more specifically local authorities, for improvements in living conditions after "liberation" in 1975. They also expressed thanks for charitable donations from Australia, Malaysia, and the U.S. that have helped overcome the consequences of heavy flooding during the past three years. The Imam highlighted help from U.S. veterans groups and former Ambassador Peterson. He also mentioned that they were happy that Vietnam had re-established relations with the U.S.

110. (U) The Phu Hiep community has developed ties with overseas Muslims in recent years. Since 1994, several elementary and secondary students have gone to Malaysia and a few to Indonesia to study the Koran and other subjects. The Imam and the deputy chief said that there are currently eleven such students overseas. Sponsors in those countries pay for their education and may pay for university education overseas as well. The Imam said he expects the students to return and work in Phu Hiep. The Imam was one of the first from the village in recent years to undertake the Hajj; about 50 others have followed, including three this year. Most, if not all, have been sponsored by the Saudi royal family, he claimed.

111. (U) Activities at the mosque itself include the cycle of five daily prayers from 4:30AM until 8:00PM, Friday noon prayers, and classes every day but Friday. There are four teachers, two male and two female. They hold classes for two hours a day on the Koran, and for Arabic and Malay. The Imam clarified that students learn Malay in preparation for possible study in Malaysia, but that no teachers from overseas come to the mosque. Another object for their studies is to prepare for Koran reading competitions. The winners of these competitions are invited to go to Malaysia, Thailand, and Brunei, according to the chief.

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Comment  
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112. (U) Contrary to some reports, it does not appear that GVN authorities are attempting to suppress the Khmer language and culture in An Giang. The Khmer whom Mission officers encountered appeared relaxed and able to practice Khmer customs at will. Khmer pagodas appeared to be in good repair and the provincial government includes Khmer officials. Khmer communities appear to be somewhat poorer than those elsewhere in An Giang, but they are decidedly better off, at least in economic terms, than their brethren across the border in Cambodia. DCM and the monk had some opportunity to speak directly to each other in Khmer and the monk came across as uninhibited and forthright.

113. (U) The Cham Muslim community leaders adopted a uniformly positive tone to describe their current situation and their attitude towards both the GVN and USG. The community's ties to Malaysia and Indonesia are more extensive than Mission had known, but are not entirely unexpected. Other religious groups in Vietnam including Buddhists, Catholics, and Protestants also send members overseas for religious education, although not at such a

young age. The Chams appear to shy away from activities that may seem controversial and show no sign of being influenced by Islamic fundamentalism. It is encouraging that local authorities allow and perhaps even encourage both groups to provide education, including language instruction, at religious institutions.

BURGHARDT